

Diversity Education Goals: A Policy Discourse Analysis

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Stuart Swain

Doctoral Student, University of Maine
Provost and VPAA, University of Maine at Machias
sswain@maine.edu

Abstract

Many U.S. colleges and universities have established student learning outcomes for diversity education in their general education programs. These education goals, frequently developed for assessment or other policy purposes, convey a range of possible purposes for diversity and multicultural learning. The manner in which these purposes are articulated shapes their focus and carries implications for practice. Using a policy discourse analysis methodology, my research explores the articulated goals, and those discourses and subject positions they advance. In particular, I consider the institution-wide diversity education goals from 56 public liberal arts colleges and universities across the United States. I present evidence that dominant discourses of market (including productivity and commodity) and harmony (including community and accumulation) are weakly offset with alternative discourses of social change, conflict, and social construction. These discourses are expressed through policy assumptions and themes at both the individual student and community levels.

Overview of Methods and Findings

I examine the ways diversity, as an educational process, is expressed and discursively produced through policy articulations of education outcomes. The guiding research question is: What priorities, discourses, and subject positions are advanced through explication of diversity education goals at public liberal arts universities?

I am interested in the overall ways educational goals construct meaning for diversity in the curriculum. Since assessment and other policy developments may be solidifying our understanding of learning outcomes, we should consider the ways we are currently constructing meaning and purpose for diversity in curriculum.

Specifically, I used policy discourse analysis as a methodology to examine the assumptions, priorities and discursive themes advanced by the policy language on diversity education goals

across 56 public liberal arts universities. Policy discourse analysis provides a poststructural, interpretive methodological lens to reveal unspoken assumptions and policy gaps, and to inquiry into the productive discursive impacts on potential policy solutions and subject positions (Allan, 2008). As such, the methodology is an excellent fit with the goals of the research project.

In reviewing the research on diversity, I identified four general frames through which diversity as an educational practice is being considered by theorists and practitioners. First is in the frame of equal opportunity—one that emphasizes access and inclusionary practices, such as attention to campus climate and expanding curricular perspectives. Second, from the frame of student development, diversity education may be positioned as a benefit to the individual student—through cognitive development, affective growth, and providing the skills and competencies to succeed in a diverse society. Third, viewing education as a vehicle for social change, diversity in the curriculum can be seen as a means of challenging and dismantling social inequities. Finally, diversity may be understood through a poststructural lens as a means of unsettling existing privileged paradigms of disciplinary thought. By being open to the “other,” disciplinary structures are ruptured and new possibilities of thought and expression develop. These four frames are summarized in the table below. My research goal has been to understand which, if any, of these, or other, frames are being established or advanced through diversity education goals.

Conceptual Framework	Primary Areas of Concern	Educational Goals (at student, community and society levels)	Educational Approaches	Relevant Researchers
Equal Opportunity	Access Integration Representation Participation	Critical Mass within Community Benefits of Learning for Entire Society	Affirmative Action Tolerance Open Attitudes Community Development	Hurtado LaBelle & Ward Smith, D.G.
Student Development	Personal Success Community and Society Achievement Citizenship	Cognitive & Psychological Development Interpersonal & Group Skills Intercultural Understanding	Multicultural Education Inquiry into Social Norms and Personal Assumptions Dialogue across Diverse Settings	Garcia Gurin Tatum
Social	Power Across	Awareness of	Critical & Feminist	Apple

Conceptual Framework	Primary Areas of Concern	Educational Goals (at student, community and society levels)	Educational Approaches	Relevant Researchers
Justice	Dimensions of Difference Impacts of Societal Oppression	Privilege & Inequality Challenge & Dismantle Oppressive Social Structures Empower Marginalized Individuals & Groups Develop New Conceptions of Community	Pedagogies Challenging Personal Biases Constructive Conflict	Harding Smith, D.E. Talbot Tierney
Transformational	Disciplinary Thought Epistemology Modes of Expression	Disrupted Disciplinary Narratives Student Comfort/Ability with Multiple Lenses Open-Ended, Unsettled Inquiry	Post-Modern Forefront Marginalized Perspectives & Frames Challenge Disciplinary Norms & Assumptions Interdisciplinary Approaches	Bensimon Foucault Kuhn Weedon

Data and Analysis

For my data, I examined publicly available texts that establish recent, institution-wide policy expectations for the goals of diversity in the overall education program. I systematically drew 134 applicable texts from policy statements such as diversity plans, strategic plans, educational assessment plans, and academic catalogs.

I used emergent coding to consider each of three overall aspects (as indicated in italics below) of the policy statements on the nature of diversity as an education goal.

The *learning mode* describes how a student is portrayed as engaging diversity as a learning process. For example, policy at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, establishes that their

curriculum “will engage students in adopting diverse perspectives to function in our multicultural world.” The learning mode is suggested by the verbs “engage” and “adopt.” The notion of adopt suggests a discourse of acquisition in a harmonious way. The student will acquire new, diverse perspectives that are not in conflict with existing perspectives. The notion of acquisition produces an image of diversity perspectives as a commodity, something that education can transfer and that students can accumulate. SUNY College at Old Westbury (A) states their curriculum “objective is...to produce...individuals who...have an awareness of their own and others' backgrounds and cultures.” Here the learning mode is acquisition of an awareness—value-neutral, cognitive, un-challenging, and suggestive of ready mental accommodation.

The primary learning mode, expressed by 46 of the institutions, is one that forefronts student acquisition of a cognitive characteristic (including acquisition of awareness, respect, knowledge, appreciation, value, skill, and competence). Secondary policy consideration is given to student analysis, experience, and creation.

Roughly twice as many institutions place attainment of diversity education in the realm of rational thought as place it within language more suggestive of an emotional connection. The emphasis on acquisition and the use of terms such as “respect” and the many instances of “appreciation” exemplify a policy position that, one, such recognition is accessible to the student; two, that it is achievable within the cognitive sphere; and, three, that the object of respect or appreciation remains a defined, understandable external entity or concept.

I looked secondly at the *outcome*—the purposes—expressed through each policy. In the MCLA example, the expressed purpose of the student adoption is to “function in a multicultural world.” There is a discourse of utility suggested by the use of the word “function,” function for some other unstated ultimate end. Since the emphasis is on the student functioning—not, for example, the community or society—a discourse of individual success is advanced as an underlying motivation. As a second example, The Evergreen State strategic plan sets an expectation that “Students learn to...bridge differences.” The outcome suggested by this policy excerpt is a student ability to harmonize differences in order to advance community and social connections. It suggests outcomes of student skills as well as community treatment and culture.

There is a wide range of intended outcomes expressed across these diversity education goals. The primary ones center on individual student abilities and bolstering community. Overall, the primary and secondary learning outcomes expressed by this set of policies are (the number of institutions for each code is indicated in parentheses):

Primary:

- Diversity awareness and understanding (41)
- Interpersonal/Intercultural skills (32)
- Diverse community: Equal access and treatment (33)
- Organizational Community and Culture (29)

Secondary:

- Student personal identity formation (19)
- Dominant and alternative disciplinary paradigms (16)
- Learning: Power, inequality, and social construction (14)
- Student action: Addressing social change (14)
- Student action: Cultural development or societal success (10)

Finally, I considered the *dimensions of diversity* as relevant. In the MCLA example above, the policy identifies a multicultural dimension. The overall study revealed a dominant focus on cultural and international diversity, with little discursive development of dimensions that implicate more immediately consideration of power differentials.

The majority of references to specific dimensions of diversity cite international and cultural diversity. For example, the SUNY Geneseo diversity plan includes the institutional objective to “Facilitate...interaction with diverse populations and a range of different perspectives, thus enabling [students] to successfully navigate an evolving and diverse world.” In this example, there is an emphasis on broad world diversity. The use of the term *evolving* suggests a shifting, challenging world environment, one for which the university can enable a student to be successful through diversity education in the more harmonious campus community. This suggests a discourse of a challenging, competitive outside environment juxtaposed with images of a supportive college community that provides an asset to the student, thereby equipping them for productive success.

Overall, the primary and secondary dimensions of diversity expressed by this set of policies are (the number of institutions for each code is indicated in parentheses):

Primary: Culture (35), International (41)

Secondary: Ability (8), Age (4), Class (9), Ethnicity (14), Gender (14), Human Difference (15), Race (13), Religion (7), Sexual Orientation (11)

Interpretations and Discourse

My interpretations, through a policy discourse analysis approach, reveal two overarching dominant discourses.

A market discourse, expressed through two subsidiary discourses of productivity and of commodity, denotes a discourse emphasizing material value and economic benefit at the individual and societal levels. It advances an image of diversity learning as acquiring something of value which, in turn, brings benefits (to students, communities and societies) and can be leveraged for other marketable gains or advantages. Such a market discourse reflects the dominant neoliberal ideology that imposes on education and other social enterprises the paradigms and economic strictures of capitalistic enterprises (Ayers, 2005; Giroux, 2002; Jones, 2009; Suspitsyna, 2010a & b).

For example, Southern Oregon University expects diversity education to “produce world citizens who are able to take their places in a global economy.” The SUNY System expects to prepare students to “work effectively in a culturally diverse and globalized environment.” The Penn State System cites student “capacity to...work effectively within multicultural and international workplaces.”

The second overarching discourse revealed through my interpretation is one of harmony, expressed through two subsidiary discourses of community and accumulation. Harmony reflects the multiple manifestations across diversity education goals of compatibility, continuity, accessibility, and shared values. Harmony is expressed through broad conceptualization of a student or community embracing, without conflict, new perspectives, which layer consistently with existing ones and provide for a newly enriched state. The new state, of individual or community, is, in turn, positioned as more fully in harmony with its internal and external circumstances. The policies promote the image of a harmonious interaction across frames of identity. The educational process is positioned as resulting in cohesive student and community development, growing from existing understandings, perspectives, and values, and achieved by adding new layers of perspectives and values.

For example, the theme advanced by SUNY College at Old Westbury (B) in setting the policy that “we celebrate our differences and work together to achieve success” conveys harmony as well as productive purposing of diversity considerations. Similar attributes are associated with California State University San Marcos’ policy to “celebrate and capitalize on...diversity to form a learning community.”

Three alternative discourses are evident within the policy statements and tend to be represented much more sparsely in the texts and expressed in more general terms. There is a weak discursive theme of social change juxtaposed with the more dominant theme of social and individual productivity. There is a strand of constructive conflict, both internal to the student and in community dialogue, which is an alternative to the dominant discourse of harmony and consistent accumulation. Likewise, an alternative questioning of disciplinary paradigms sets a challenge to the discourse of diversity as solely a supplement to dominant disciplinary perspectives and values.

Overall, this policy discourse analysis of diversity education goals provides observations on the primary and alternative discourses produced through these policy articulations and provides interpretations on the impacts for student subject positions.

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